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Pop-Up City

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Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg

Urbanism was once the stuff of steel, concrete and streets. Now, it's just as likely to be on your palm-top.

What can we learn from the video director Hype Williams's observation that wherever you go 'cool kids have the urban look'? Do 'cool kids' only live in cities? Or has urbanity become a 'look' in a fashion shoot the size of the globe? After losing the word 'house' to dance music, planners and architects have to admit that another essential word of their professional vocabulary has been colonised by domains far more frivolous. 'Urban' has moved elsewhere. Will the city thus be lost forever? Start to see it as a combination of different 'mediascapes' and you might understand where it has gone.

Multimediality

Where once the lightshow of Times Square in New York was a rare example of media presence, nowadays most metropolises have their centres wrapped in electronic screens of all sorts. The senses of the average person are continuously triggered, stimulated and enhanced. At every corner of the street digital messages are beaming the latest denim frenzy of Levi's, the thirst quenching promise of Coca-Cola and the cool-chic of D&G. Blown-up TV-screens and message boards inform us non-stop about news and weather forecasts. Long before we reach our destination places, we find out which roads have traffic jams and which parking-lots still have vacant spots. These are all digital signs. There are also analogue images: slogans, stickers, graffiti and posters on every possible surfaces of the city battle for our attention. The city is now a collection of media that have merged into each other. These mass medial qualities of the city prove that the classical concept of 'the city' has become problematic. How can we form an image of a city when a constant flood of information and (recycled) images destabilises the perception of our physical environment? Los Angeles, Tokyo and London have literally become un-imaginable. What the city we live in is really like is unclear for all of us. Media hooked up with the city to create a bastard landscape that transforms and 're-mediate' everything continuously. As the city has turned into a hybrid place in which several spatial conditions merge into each other, can we do anything else than treat it a mass medium we happen to now live in?

Virtuality

To say that the urban has become a mediated bastard is not enough. Our habitat also reaches into virtual space. As a consequence the city is finding its way into the virtual 'scapes' of different media. When we look at Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, a new world emerges, one that is exploiting the possibilities of broad bandwidth internet connections. In games like Everquest, World of Warcraft and Project Entropia millions of players world-wide get together in three-dimensional neighbourhoods. Hidden to most non-players, a global economy has emerged in which virtual houses, islands, hotels and resorts are traded. In 2004, a gamer bought a virtual space resort for \$100,000. The space station is described as a 'monumental project' and comes with mining and hunting taxation rights. On special Internet trading sites like My Game Stock and Internet Game Exchange these objects are sold. On eBay you will bump into a virtual economy that beats the national product of the average East-European country. Already in 2001 the American economist Edward Castranova found out that the gross national product (GNP) of the multiplayer online game Norrath could be seen as the 77th highest of the world, right after the economy of Bulgaria. Will this virtualisation process spread its tentacles further into our daily lives? The developers of the game Project Entropia took a next step in mixing the virtual gaming world with the 'real world'. They've announced that the money that is used in their online game environment can soon be cashed at ATM-machines for 'real' money. 10 Project Entropia Dollars (P.E.D.) will represent 1 US Dollar. In this environment, where actual and virtual collide, the future is always present.

Connectivity

The virtual worlds of online-gaming show that nobody cares that your real name, gender or age is not the same as that of your avatar. Having sex with a 50 year old male chemist that looks like a 28 year old female model is no big deal. Authenticity is of no importance in a virtual landscape. Although nearly every MMORPG offers their players the possibility to marry online in a wedding chapel complete with wedding rings and a priest, lasting relationships are a rarity. In mediated realms we live in 'thin' communities that are not based on strong ties. This connectivity works in many ways. Outside the streets and squares of the traditional city, new social environments have developed. A MMORPG is not only gaming, it is socializing. As a consequence several game developers involve the manpower, man-hours and intelligence of their mass audience by giving them a part in the design of the environments that they inhabit. The 18th century genius ('I did it my way') has turned into a 'scenius', where the intelligence of a big group of individuals

is mobilised and made productive. The scenius shouts: 'We do it our way'. The D.I.Y-environments of the scenius are able to contain millions of people. By paying a monthly fee, players from all over the globe build towns, fight battles and join gangs in games like LineAge II and World of Warcraft. This social reality is developing away from historical and geographical ties and is completely saturated with global popular culture. Connectivity causes a 'mediaspora' of public spheres that all have local connections. The result is a social network in which one-way traffic is non-existent. With the electronic globalisation of pop culture, a together-ness is unfolding that keeps changing in size and place.

Interactivity

Being in the city means having a continuous interaction with our environment. Interactivity has become our very essence. New York rap star Fat Joe has been wrong all the time when he said we should all 'lean back'. Now, we lean forward – over our keyboards, cellphones and game-consoles – embracing technology in a post-paranoic state of mind. No mobile phone: no business. No laptop: no friends. We have to look for points where closed structures are combined with each other. The urban appears in nodes where systems move into one and other; a void in which closed structures open up. Always related to a three-dimensional space, interactivity marks the very access point of urbanity. It is an entrance to different spatial settings, spheres or virtual neighbourhoods. Urbanism now means interactive systems are mutually influencing each other. It shows how they are detaching themselves from their physical context to start to function independently. Therefore interactivity should be approached in relation to a social context. In that way, architecture will be a connection that allows us to move from one closed off environment to the other. Refraining some and allowing other people access to a certain point will become the most important function of architecture in this version of the future.

(E)scaping the city

We have to understand the city in terms of its medial qualities. For too long the discourse of the city has been refrained of a media theory. Vibrant and energetic human conurbations only exist when they are connected. To you, to me, to your house, to the street, to the next city, to fashion, to magazines, to TV. As a consequence we need to detach the word urban from 'the city'. A city is only urban when it mixes a vast range of media, has a strong virtual backing and combines public splintered spheres into an interactive space. So, to find the city we will have to start to see it as a node where multimediality, virtuality, connectivity and interactivity are strengthening each other. This place is not

given, it can be actualised 'right here, right now'. We call this assembly point 'Nodal Urbanity'. Nodal Urbanity destroys our idea of the city as an inhabited place of a particular size that you can find on Google Earth. However Nodal Urbanity is not another attempt to deconstruct the notion of the city. It puts forward a new kind of city that is no longer stuck in its physical domain. It is a relational space, which has been stripped of inherent qualities and stable structures. This dynamic space is instable and contingent. Combine the four mediascapes and urbanity pops up anywhere and anytime.